



SAFETY SKILLS BY DON GOMO

Owning Up

In a land filled with lawyers pursuing cases and lawsuits tossed around in every direction, one gets the impression that it's easier to point the finger of blame at others than to admit one's own faults. As bikers,

we need to be aware of the blame game in all cases, and assume responsibility as necessary. I'm sure many vehicular lawsuits involving motorcycles are valid, but I would venture to guess that there is a portion that cite others being at fault when the core of the problem may have been caused by cyclists.

We need to realize that when riding, our safety is our responsibility. Being aware of developing situations, considering possibilities, and knowing the surroundings all fall on ourselves. Most of all, we need to know how to ride within our limits, and to know our individual skills and capabilities. Another point to consider is that experience is not the same as skill. Many of us consider the two to be the same, when there can be a major difference between them. I've had students in ERCs who have been riding for more than 20 years, but when they complete the class, their collective riding ability is less than fair. Now you might say that anybody who learns something new could have trouble working out the bugs. True, but what we teach are basic rider skills. ERC students learn the same exercises that beginner riders are taught, except that they use their own bikes and already have licenses.

In New York state, where I instruct, it's estimated that 90 percent of all motorcycle accidents involve a rider that has had no proper training or education in motorcycling skills. Experience will definitely benefit a rider when it comes to reading the road. There's a lot to be said for being streetwise and savvy, but what good is it if you can't back it up with skills? There are numerous independent studies that show an increase in motorcycle single vehicle accidents, with some indicating that the percentages exceed the growth of the sport itself. Seeing high numbers in that category should raise a red flag for us. Too many bikes are crashing because of rider errors. And another thing to think about, why are we more accepting of the word *accident* than *crash*? It's almost as if we're saying that being involved in a crash admits fault on our part, and we don't want to do that, do we?

Sure, there are plenty of instances where a driver may have been the cause of a vehicle mishap, but when you see damaged bikes lying far away from cars at an accident scene, you may wonder who the responsible party is. Consider this: you're cruising down the road when you notice that there's a car ahead pulling out of an intersection as if you weren't there. The driver suddenly sees you, and stops half way in your lane, but it's too late: you've already gone through your panic stage, grabbed a handful of brake, and now you're coming to a stop while sliding down the road. Ouch!

Granted, the driver of the car was the cause of the situation, but if the rider were more skilled than experienced, he may have used better stopping or swerving skills to avoid the car. Actually, the cycle's crash was the fault of the cyclist, despite the situation developing through the actions of someone else. The rider will probably explain it as a scenario where he had no choice but to lay his bike down. When you hear that, it normally means "I screwed up."

Riding wide on curves, failing to anticipate drivers making sudden turns in front of us, riding too fast, not being fully alert, or even riding with mixed skill levels of cyclists, are just some of the situations we can avoid to prevent roadway problems. We need to own up to the fact that our safety starts with us. Do what you need to do to keep yourself safe on the roads, even if it means leaving your ego in the garage until you return home. Think of riding like a chess game: if you just make a move without considering your opponent's next move, there's a big chance you'll lose. What happens if we ride and act without thinking about the possible outcomes? There's a good chance we'll lose as well. Contemplating whether you need to improve and practice your skills shouldn't take long; your experience should tell you that learning more would be a major benefit to your riding safety. As cyclists, we must realize that we're our own first defense. Learn and practice the proper safety skills and ride to win. Keep it safe out there. **AIM**